

Dear Members of the Senate Local Government committee,

My name is Jennifer Sweten. I am a lifelong resident of Montana. I have lived all across this state at one time or another, but Missoula is the place I have called home for the last 12 years. I am here today because of the effort of some to prevent any additions to the protected classes of citizens in the Montana Human Rights Act. I am here to ask you to vote against HB 516.

Discrimination is still a problem in Montana. People are treated differently based entirely on their race, sex, origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or mental handicap, and other differences that make each of us unique individuals. I find it unacceptable that in 2011 there are citizens of this state who are legally discriminated against because they fit into a group that others may not understand. Missoula and Bozeman decided that ALL of their citizens (or employees) are equal. These two cities said the status quo wasn't good enough anymore.

After failing twice in District court to have the Missoula ordinance overturned, the opponents of this law asked Representative Hansen to introduce HB 516 to circumvent the Judiciary of this state and remove the voice of the people from their own governance. Make no mistake, HB 516 is a pointed effort to keep legal discrimination alive. If this bill was about maintaining the Montana Human Rights Act as the one and only law in the state, then Governor's Executive Order No. 41-2008 would have been challenged years ago. This order adds political affiliation or ideas, social origin or condition, and sexual orientation as protected classes for State Employees.

Discrimination is still a problem in Montana, but today you can make it a little better. Allowing Missoula and Bozeman to keep their laws, and allow other communities that same choice in the future, hurts absolutely no one. If HB 516 becomes law, thousands of Montanans will be negatively affected. Please, vote 'NO' to House Bill 516 and support diversity and equality in this great state.

Thank You,

Jennifer Sweten
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